

THROUGH GEORGE ORWELL'S EYES: THE ROAD TO TOTALITARIANISM

1. The Ministry of Truth: Words as Slogans (February 1)
- 2. Big Brother and the Worship of Power (February 8)**
3. Love and the Breaking of the Human Spirit (February 15)

2. Big Brother and the Worship of Power

1. In 1984 by George Orwell, O'Brien gives Winston Smith a "secret book."
 - 1.1. The book, titled *The Theory and Practice of Oligarchical Collectivism* and attributed to Emmanuel Goldstein, is presented as a forbidden text explaining how the Party maintains power.
 - 1.2. For Winston, receiving it seems to confirm his belief that O'Brien is part of the resistance and that there exists an organized opposition to Big Brother.
2. The content of the book articulates ideas Winston has only sensed intuitively:
 - 2.1. the division of society into High, Middle, and Low classes,
 - 2.2. the use of perpetual war to control populations,
 - 2.3. and the manipulation of truth to preserve political dominance.
3. In this sense, the book provides intellectual validation of Winston's rebellion and gives him language to understand the way the system works.
4. However, the episode is deeply ironic.
 - 4.1. The book does not liberate Winston; instead, it is part of the Party's trap.
 - 4.2. O'Brien never intended to awaken Winston permanently but to expose and crush dissent.
5. The book symbolizes the illusion of forbidden knowledge under totalitarianism. It is information that appears subversive but is ultimately controlled by the regime itself.
6. Here are some quotations from the book:

The ruling groups were always infected to some extent by liberal ideas, and were content to leave loose ends everywhere, to regard only the overt act and to be uninterested in what their subjects were thinking. Even the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages was tolerant by modern standards. Part of the reason for this was that in the past no government had the power to keep its citizens under constant surveillance. The invention of print, however, made it

easier to manipulate public opinion, and the film and the radio carried the process further. (223)

But the problems of perpetuating a hierarchical society go deeper than this. There are only four ways in which a ruling group can fall from power.

- Either it is conquered from without,
- or it governs so inefficiently that the masses are stirred to revolt,
- or it allows a strong and discontented Middle group to come into being,
- or it loses its own self-confidence and willingness to govern. (225)

All past oligarchies have fallen from power either because they ossified or because they grew soft. Either they became stupid and arrogant, failed to adjust themselves to changing circumstances, and were overthrown; or they became liberal and cowardly, made concessions when they should have used force, and once again were overthrown. (233)

7. Totalitarian systems operate through narratives strengthened by rituals that sustain loyalty and continuity beyond individual leaders.

The older kind of Socialist, who had been trained to fight against something called 'class privilege' assumed that what is not hereditary cannot be permanent. He did not see that the continuity of an oligarchy need not be physical, nor did he pause to reflect that hereditary aristocracies have always been shortlived, whereas adoptive organizations such as the Catholic Church have sometimes lasted for hundreds or thousands of years. The essence of oligarchical rule is not father-to-son inheritance, but the persistence of a certain world-view and a certain way of life, imposed by the dead upon the living. (228)

8. Winston reads the book up to the point where the real motive of the Party is about to be unveiled. His reading though is abruptly cut short by his arrest:

Here we reach the central secret. As we have seen. the mystique of the Party, and above all of the Inner Party, depends upon DOUBLETHINK But deeper than this lies the original motive, the never-questioned instinct that first led to the seizure of power and brought DOUBLETHINK, the Thought Police, continuous warfare, and all the other necessary paraphernalia into existence afterwards. This motive really consists... (235)

9. The novel deliberately withholds the answer to the question of why the Party seeks power until Winston is physically and psychologically broken by months of torture at O'Brien's hands, and this timing is crucial to its meaning.

9.1. The Party explains itself only after it has already demonstrated, in practice, that power determines truth rather than the other way around.

9.2. The unmasked disclosure of its purely self-serving motive is not an act of honesty but of impunity; a display of domination so complete that the truth can be stated openly because it does not have the capacity to endanger power.

10. At first O'Brien asks Winston to answer the question of *Why*

'And now let us get back to the question of 'how' and 'why'. You understand well enough HOW the Party maintains itself in power. Now tell me WHY we cling to power. What is our motive? Why should we want power? Go on,²

‘speak,’ he added as Winston remained silent. Nevertheless Winston did not speak for another moment or two. A feeling of weariness had overwhelmed him. The faint, mad gleam of enthusiasm had come back into O’Brien’s face. He knew in advance what O’Brien would say.

- That the Party did not seek power for its own ends, but only for the good of the majority.
- That it sought power because men in the mass were frail, cowardly creatures who could not endure liberty or face the truth, and must be ruled over and systematically deceived by others who were stronger than themselves.
- That the choice for mankind lay between freedom and happiness, and that, for the great bulk of mankind, happiness was better.
- That the party was the eternal guardian of the weak, a dedicated sect doing evil that good might come, sacrificing its own happiness to that of others. (284)

11. Then O’Brien gives the real, chilling answer:

‘Now I will tell you the answer to my question. It is this.

- The Party seeks power entirely for its own sake. We are not interested in the good of others; we are interested solely in power. Not wealth or luxury or long life or happiness: only power, pure power. What pure power means you will understand presently.
- We are different from all the oligarchies of the past, in that we know what we are doing. All the others, even those who resembled ourselves, were cowards and hypocrites.
- The German Nazis and the Russian Communists came very close to us in their methods, but they never had the courage to recognize their own motives. They pretended, perhaps they even believed, that they had seized power unwillingly and for a limited time, and that just round the corner there lay a paradise where human beings would be free and equal.
- We are not like that. We know that no one ever seizes power with the intention of relinquishing it. Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard a revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship. The object of persecution is persecution. The object of torture is torture. The object of power is power. (285f)

‘We are the priests of power,’ he said. ‘God is power.

- But at present power is only a word so far as you are concerned. It is time for you to gather some idea of what power means.
- The first thing you must realize is that power is collective.
- The individual only has power in so far as he ceases to be an individual. You know the Party slogan: ‘Freedom is Slavery’. Has it ever occurred to you that it is reversible? Slavery is freedom. Alone—free—the human being is always defeated. (286)

Commentary

12. 1984 portrays a political system where power ceases to be instrumental and becomes an end in itself. This portrayal might seem an hyperbole but it is intended to expose a tendency inherent in the unchecked pursuit of power that happens in all political systems, even when this pursuit does not reach such an extreme form.
 - 12.1. Power no longer exists to secure happiness, stability, or even survival, but an end in itself: “the object of power is power.”
 - 12.2. It no longer answers to human flourishing. It exists solely to perpetuate itself, functioning less like a political tool than a self-perpetuating mechanism.
 - 12.3. Big Brother is crucial to this transformation. He is never seen, possibly nonexistent, yet omnipresent in representation. It is a catalyst for love, fear, loyalty, and hatred that can never be challenged precisely because it is not a person but a placeholder for absolute power.
 - 12.4. Within this structure, O’Brien is not a hypocrite but someone who is himself completely captive of this mechanism. He knows that everything is a lie except power perpetuating itself, but he himself has become completely instrumental to this end. He is himself expendable. What he gains is not pleasure but total identification with the system.
 - 12.5. In this sense he is a ‘priest’ of power: power has become an idol, an object of worship rather than a means of governance.
13. What ultimately drives this absolutization of power is a distorted pursuit of immortality and invulnerability, that is of divine prerogatives, an attempt to become like “God”.
 - 13.1. Power promises endurance beyond individual fragility: affirmation without dependence, security without trust, permanence without mortality.
 - 13.2. Yet because no individual can truly be immortal or invulnerable, these qualities are transferred to an impersonal system that can outlast any one human life.
 - 13.3. Power thus ceases to be something possessed by individuals (Big Brother is just a symbol) and becomes an autonomous structure, functioning independently of the people who are devoted to its perpetuation.
 - 13.4. In surrendering to such a system, individuals trade personal agency, relationality, and finitude for participation in something that appears eternal.
 - 13.5. The irony is that in seeking divine attributes, they relinquish what makes them human, becoming replaceable components within a mechanism that uses and discards them.
 - 13.6. Immortality is achieved not by preserving the self, but by dissolving it into a system that survives by consuming those who serve it.
14. This absolutization of power is a result of what, in Christian tradition, is called *pride*.
 - 14.1. To be human is to be dependent: dependent on God for one’s being and life, and dependent on each other for one’s flourishing.
 - 14.2. We are in the right relation to reality by accepting that happiness and flourishing is not self-generated but received through gift, grace, and mutual reliance.
 - 14.3. Pride by contrast, is the rejection of this condition. It is the refusal to accept dependence as a good, and the attempt to secure life, meaning, and security independently.

- 14.4. Once dependence is experienced as a threat rather than a gift, control replaces trust.
- 15. This is why pride destroys community.
 - 15.1. Genuine interpersonal relations require mutual vulnerability, reciprocity, and the acceptance of limits.
 - 15.2. Pride sees vulnerability as weakness and interdependence as humiliation.
- 16. The Eucharist as *thanksgiving*, stands in direct opposition to pride and to the idolatry of power.
 - 16.1. To give thanks is to acknowledge that life is received rather than seized, that existence itself is a gift before it is an achievement.
 - 16.2. It affirms that human flourishing arises not from self-sufficiency or control, but from seeking the good of one another.
 - 16.3. The Eucharist gathers people not as competitors or instruments, but as recipients of the same gift and teaches us that dependence is not a weakness to be overcome, but as the very condition of life together.
- 17. In this way the Eucharist functions as an antidote to the idolatry of power.
 - 17.1. Where the unchecked pursuit of power seeks to eliminate vulnerability, contingency, and reliance on others, the Eucharist teaches us their value.
 - 17.2. It does not promise invulnerability, permanence, or mastery, but life through shared gift.
 - 17.3. The central gesture is not taking but receiving.
- 18. More profoundly still, the Eucharist reveals the true nature of God.
 - 18.1. God is revealed not as absolute power (Big Brother) but as self-giving love.
 - 18.2. Divine power resides not in the capacity to impose or compel, but in the freedom to give without forcing and to wait for a response that comes from within.
- 19. This is why the one God *has* to be a Trinity
 - 19.1. For God not to be the self-sufficient, self-referential locus of power (like Orwell's Big Brother)
 - 19.2. He has to be the one who constantly *gives* everything he is, included being God, to other than himself.
 - 19.3. This act of giving results in the Son, who acknowledges that all he is (included being God) is received from the Father – and he proves this acknowledgement by giving everything to the Father in return as thanksgiving (this is the Eucharist in the life of the Trinity).
 - 19.4. And what is given by the Father and returned by the Son is what unites them, makes them one – what we call *love* – and this love, this communion is the Holy Spirit.
- 20. In God worshiped as Trinity, power is never held but shared, given – this is why it can benefit everyone equally and completely.